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“It’s complicated”: The lived experience of female sexual desire

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Abstract

‘What is sexual desire and how do women experience it?’ is the central question of this hermeneutic phenomenological study. The goal was to challenge the pathologisation of women’s sexual desire by highlighting its complexity, situatedness and temporality. In-depth interviews and autobiographical art data elicited in partnership with seven participants were interpreted and analysed using a life course perspective to highlight how both positive and negative experiences, as well as the acceptance or resistance of cultural scripts and double standards, contribute over time to a woman’s sense of her own access to sexual desire, agency around sexual decision-making, and entitlement to sexual pleasure. In line with the study’s meta-theoretical principles, the researcher completed a parallel reflexive writing and art practice to deepen her engagement with participant experience. In analysing all data, it became evident that women’s sexual desire, develops through a complex multistage process over the lifetime. Participants all reflected MacNeil and Byers’ (2005) finding that the more comfortable and agentic a woman feels in expressing her sexuality and communicating her desires, the greater her feelings for intimacy and the higher likelihood that she will derive satisfaction in sex.

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